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Though the Subject Is Poison, the C.I.A. Revelations Bring on Nervous Giggles

By LINDA CHARLTON

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 16—Every now and then the hearing room was swept by nervous giggles today, as when the Central Intelligence Agency's former top chemist said that all he knew about a lethal shellfish toxin was that he had been told "it's good stuff."

The chemist, Dr. Nathan Gordon, provoked another muffled snort during the hearings by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence when he went on to talk about another C.I.A. item, this one guaranteed to produce nothing more lethal than "a real severe case of the tummies."

Dr. Gordon was not trying to be funny. He was trying to explain how it was, in apparent defiance of two Presidential edicts, he had held onto 10.9 grams of the shellfish toxin — enough to kill thousands of persons—in the vault of his laboratory.

Doubted Applicability

Dr. Gordon, a tall, stooping man, with dark-rimmed spectacles and thinning hair brushed back to curl over the collar of his blue suit, had taken advantage of a Senate rule that allows a subpoenaed witness to bar television or other cameras during his testimony. So the Senate hearing room, the same grand, marble-pillared chamber that once echoed with Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr.'s declamations, was lighted only by four heavy crystal chandeliers.

Dr. Gordon, told the Senate anel, yes, he had stored the shellfish toxin, which works by blocking the transmission of nervous-system impulses. But he insisted that he had done so because, first, he did not believe the 1969 and 1970 While Hose directives applied to the C.I.A. and, second, they applied to bacteriological agents, not chemical ones, anyway.

He said that he thought it important for the agency to maintain "a potential capability in behavioral materials," meaning the shellfish poison and similar laboratory triumphs.

Dr. Gordon's chief, Richard Helms, the former Director of Central Intelligence who is now Ambassador to Iran, sat in a reserved seat in the front row of the spectator section. He seemed detached and impassive, and he fiddled with the cardboard "reserved" sign as he listened to Dr. Gordon.

During the morning, the present director, William E. Colby, told the committee about some of the ways the C.I.A. had devised to deliver its various poisons, including a formidable dart gun that his lawyer, Mitchell Rogovin, handed to the committee.

No Pointing

"Don't point that at me," said Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, the committee chairman, lightly but nervously. Mr. Colby had told the committee that the dart gun fired nearly silently and was accurate at 100 meters. He described, but did not have with him, such other devices as a fountain-pen dart launcher and a bolt that, when placed in a machine, exudes its poison as the machine warms in use. He had brought the dart gun at the committee's request.

Mr. Golby's account of why the shellfish taxin was not destroyed differed from Gordon's. The director said that the "retired agency officer" in charge—who turned out to be Dr. Gordon—had "made this decision based on the fact that the cost and difficulty of isolating the shellfish toxin were so great that it simply made no sense to destroy it, particularly when there would be no future source of the toxin."

But he also said that the precious poison has been used only once. It was, he said, given to the U-2 spy plane pilot, Francis Gary Powers, for the 1960 flight over the Soviet Union. Mr. Colby said the toxin was in a tiny poison needle concealed in a silver dollar, to provide Mr. Powers with "as option" in case he was shot down. He was shot down, but that was an otpion he chose not to exercise.